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Colombia: Crisis on the Drug Front

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An Intelligence Assessment

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Colombia: Crisis on the Drug Front

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted]
Strategic Narcotics Branch, International Security
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OGI, [redacted]

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**Colombia: Crisis
on the Drug Front**

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 16 March 1984
was used in this report.*

US drug control policy in Latin America may suffer a serious setback because of the deteriorating narcotics situation in Colombia:

- The *marijuana crop* in 1983 was about 60 percent larger than the previous year's drought-affected crop, and prospects for the 1984 harvest are now good. Colombia supplies 70 to 80 percent of the marijuana imported annually into the United States.
- *Coca cultivation* has increased dramatically since 1980. Colombia grew enough coca last year to produce some 10 metric tons of cocaine hydrochloride—roughly 20 percent of the cocaine consumed annually in the United States. We project that by 1986 Colombia will be able to produce between 30 and 40 tons of cocaine from domestically cultivated coca leaf.
- Some Colombian traffickers maintain an extensive *trafficking infrastructure* to market these products as well as the cocaine from Bolivia and Peru.
- Colombian *trafficking syndicates* have recently increased efforts to influence Colombian politics and to use the media to foster a better public image. Their structure and the secretive, closed manner in which they operate—usually relying on trusted family members—continue to frustrate efforts by drug enforcement agencies to penetrate these organizations and to halt their illicit activities.
- *Government plans* and initiatives often either do not have the backing of President Betancur or because of a lack of resources are not equal to the task. []

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Prospects for a comprehensive drug control program are bleak. President Betancur's awareness of the domestic political sensitivities involved in an antinarcotics effort and his foreign policy—designed in part to demonstrate his independence from the United States—are both limiting factors. We do not believe Betancur will discontinue any existing drug control efforts, but, without his staunch support, national programs—such as a widespread aerial herbicidal spray campaign—needed to counter the continued production of marijuana and the rapid increase in coca output will face an uphill battle. []

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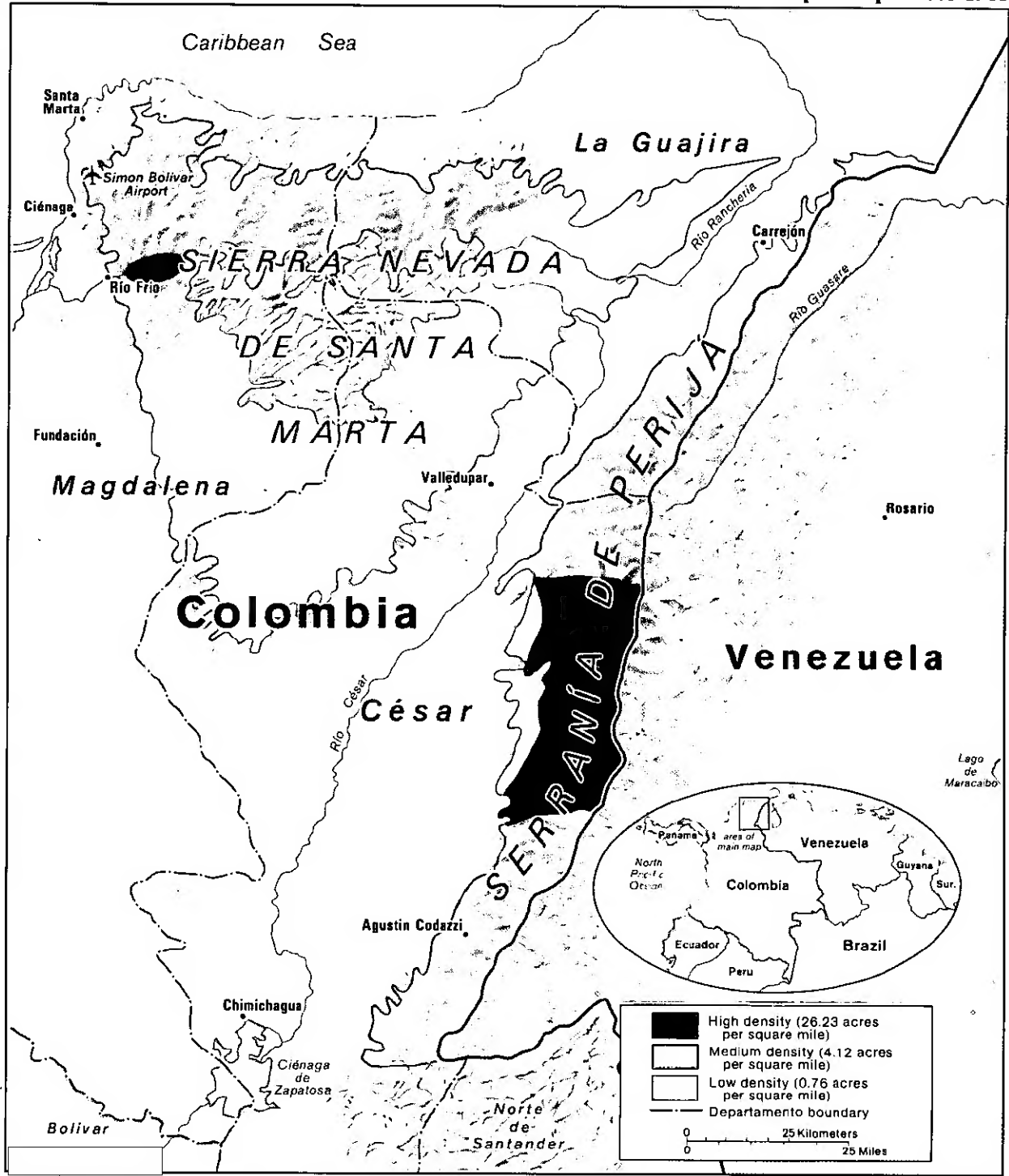
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Figure 1
Marijuana Cultivation

April-September 1983



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Colombia: Crisis on the Drug Front

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Colombia plays a key role in the US antinarcotics policy in Latin America. Colombia is the center for the processing and trafficking of cocaine grown in Bolivia and Peru, as well as in Colombia, and provides a major share of the marijuana imported into the United States. Several trends point to a deterioration of the narcotics situation in Colombia. Despite US initiatives and some Colombian antinarcotics efforts, marijuana and cocaine production is flourishing, the drug production and trafficking infrastructure continues to develop and expand, domestic drug abuse is growing, and some traffickers are becoming bolder in their attempt to gain legitimacy. This paper examines the current drug situation in Colombia, the government's response, the constraints to a comprehensive national drug control program, and a set of events that serve as key indicators to a change in the Colombian drug scene.

Marijuana. Marijuana production in Colombia increased dramatically last year, up almost 60 percent over output in 1982—when drought affected the crop—and somewhat higher than the estimated average annual production during 1979-81.

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Colombia's Magdalena, Cesar, and La Guajira Departments—located in the northeast along the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and Serrania de Perija mountains—revealed an increase in the area for the fall harvest (figure 1). Between 80 and 90 percent of Colombian marijuana is grown in this area, and the fall harvest has recently accounted for some two-thirds of the annual crop. Of the 13,500 metric tons of marijuana we estimate were harvested in 1983, we expect some 11,000 tons will be shipped to the United States.

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Coca. Coca cultivation in Colombia has nearly tripled in recent years—from approximately 5,000 hectares in 1980 to some 15,600 hectares in 1983 (figure 2). We estimate Colombian-cultivated coca plants yielded some 4,600 tons of coca leaf in 1983—enough to produce roughly 10 tons of cocaine, 20 percent of the cocaine consumed annually in the United States. This increase in coca cultivation has occurred primarily in southeastern Colombia. Coca is also grown in the southwestern departments of Cauca, Narino, and Putamayo, which presently account for less than 15 percent, roughly 2,000 hectares, of Colombian coca hectarage.

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Illicit Drug Cultivation and Trafficking

Drug Cultivation

Colombia remains the primary source of US imports of marijuana and cocaine. Some 70 to 80 percent of the marijuana imported into the United States is grown in Colombia, according to estimates by the US National Narcotics Intelligence Consumer Committee (NNICC). Colombian traffickers have long overseen the cocaine trade, refining coca leaf grown in Peru and Bolivia and smuggling the cocaine into the United States. Increasingly, however, coca is being grown within Colombia as well.¹

¹ Colombian traffickers are known principally for their involvement in the marijuana and cocaine trade; however, since 1977 there have been several unconfirmed reports and persistent rumors of illicit opium poppy cultivation in Colombia. US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) sources have reported the existence of opium poppy cultivation in the Departments of Valle de Cauca (1977), Boyaca (1979), and Vichada (1982 and 1983). Investigations by DEA personnel have turned up no evidence of opium poppy cultivation in these areas, and DEA suspects that the informants probably sighted a nontoxic green vine that resembles opium poppy.

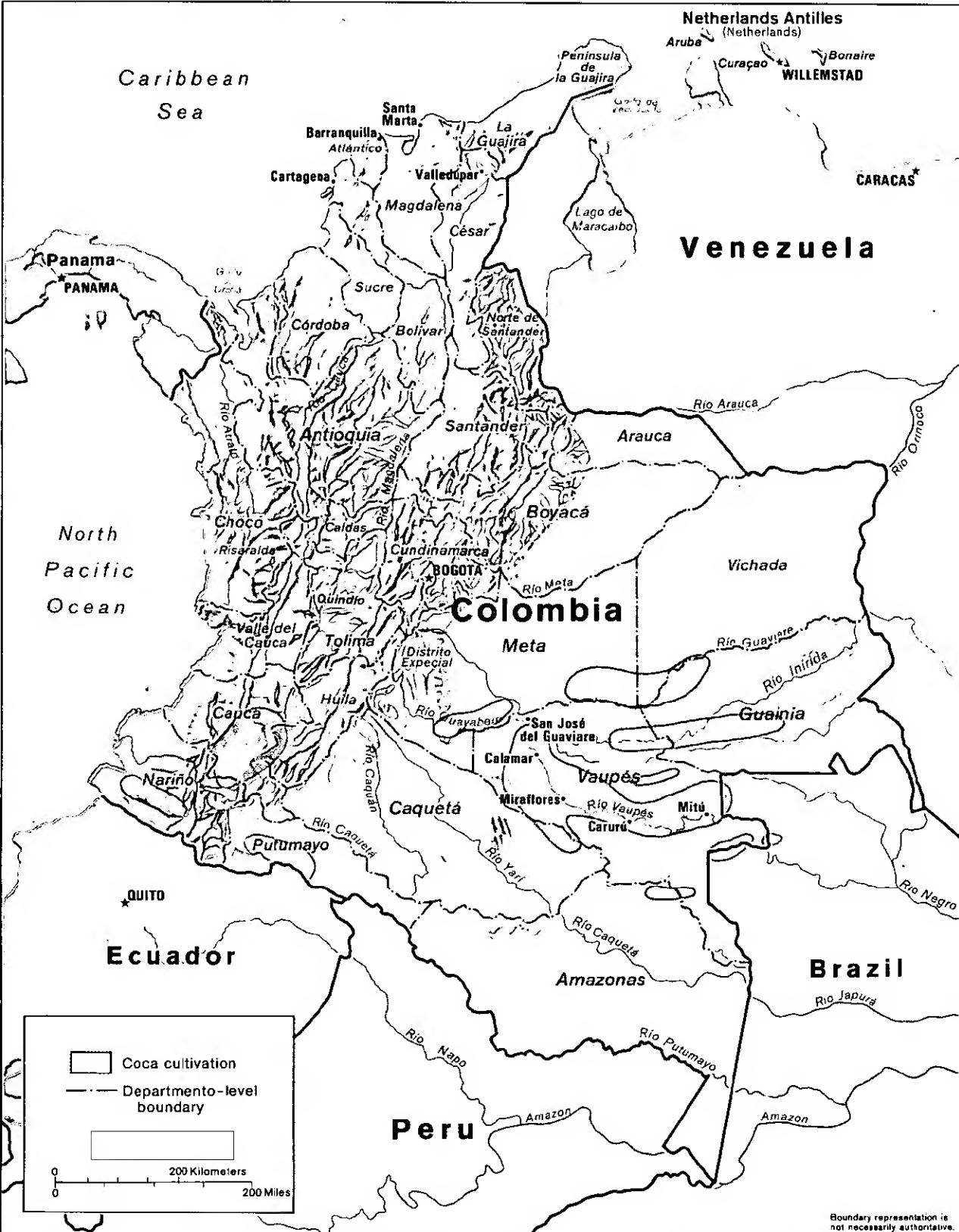
Outlook for Production. Although it is still too early in the crop season to forecast production of marijuana or coca for 1984, we see no evidence as yet that production will drop below the 1983 level. Two marijuana crops are normally harvested, one in the period March-April and one in August-September. Weather has been good for the spring-harvested crop, and at

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Figure 2
Coca Cultivation



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least average yields can be expected. Coca is harvested three or four times a year. Coca yields are affected less by weather and more by the maturity of the plant, with maximum yields reached when plants are four to eight years old. Satellite imagery will be used later in the crop season to measure more precisely the area of marijuana and coca harvested and to estimate likely production. []

Beyond 1984 production potential—especially for coca—is much greater. As recently planted coca fields in southeastern Colombia mature, yields will rise. We estimate that by 1986 this region—with no increase in the number of coca fields—will be able to grow enough coca leaf to produce between 30 and 40 tons of cocaine hydrochloride annually. Should increased international demand for Colombian cocaine prompt further expansion of the cultivated area, production would of course be greater. []

Trafficking

Colombian drug traffickers have already developed an infrastructure that would accommodate an expansion in activities. Extensive clandestine facilities have been established in remote areas of southeastern and northern Colombia to support the illegal cultivation, processing, and transshipment of cocaine and marijuana. []

Marijuana Trafficking. After harvesting, the marijuana is dried and the leaves stripped from the plant and pressed into bales. The bales, which each weigh about 20 to 25 kilograms, are wrapped in a variety of materials—including paper, plastic, and burlap—depending on how the marijuana will be exported. For example, bales shipped from Colombia to the United States by air may be wrapped in paper and/or burlap, whereas bales that will be airdropped into the open sea for subsequent pickup by boats are wrapped in several layers of waterproof materials. After packaging, the marijuana is moved by mule train from the growing areas to collection points, where it is transferred to trucks and transported to clandestine airstrips or coastal transshipment sites. []

[] traffickers have at their disposal more than 195 airstrips—160 of which are not registered with the Colombian Government—on the Peninsula de la Guajira and in the area

surrounding the marijuana-growing areas in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (figure 7, foldout). A total of 74 of the unregistered airstrips are on the Peninsula de la Guajira, the primary staging area for US-bound marijuana shipments, and 47 of these have been constructed since 1975, when marijuana cultivation began to increase significantly in this region. All of the unregistered airstrips have graded earth or unimproved surfaces; they vary in length from 235 to 2,435 meters. Although the registration of an airstrip with the government does not preclude its use for illicit purposes, we believe that an unregistered airstrip is more likely to be used for illicit purposes than one that is registered. []

Traffickers on the Peninsula de la Guajira also have access to more than 100 coastal locations that can be used for loading drugs—averaging 11.5 tons per ship—onto US-bound vessels (figures 7 and 3). Drug-related transfer operations are usually conducted under the cover of darkness, using small motorboats to shuttle marijuana to ships that usually stay 10 to 20 kilometers offshore to avoid detection (figure 4). []

Cocaine Trafficking. After harvesting, coca leaves are taken to nearby laboratories where chemical processing reduces their weight and volume. In most cases these laboratories are open-sided thatch- or tarpaper-roofed shelters with rudimentary equipment, located in or near the coca fields, although some laboratories destroyed by DEA and Colombian National Police units have been concealed as far as 1.5 kilometers from the coca fields. Recently large laboratories made of sheet metal have been observed in several clusters of coca fields along the Rio Vaupes and at a sophisticated cocaine-processing facility seized by the Colombia National Police along the Rio Taurare. []

Transportation in the jungle of southeastern Colombia is generally limited to the major rivers and their navigable tributaries or to air travel. DEA reports that drug traffickers usually rely on small motorized canoes to ferry supplies such as gasoline, sodium

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bicarbonate, and sulfuric acid to their coca fields and processing facilities. These boats also are used to transport coca products upstream to the west, where they are then shipped out of the region via land routes. [REDACTED]

Traffickers operating in the remote areas of southeastern Colombia also use aircraft to provide fast, cost-effective, secure transportation to their coca fields and processing facilities. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] we have identified 91 airstrips, 78 of which are not registered with the Colombian Government (figures 5 and 6). The 78 unregistered airstrips have unimproved or graded earth runways that vary in

length from 250 to 1,500 meters. Medium-sized, twin-engine aircraft can operate on these runways. In addition to the 78 unregistered airstrips that the drug traffickers have hacked out of the jungle, traffickers also use registered airstrips such as those in Miraflores, Calamar, and Caruru. [REDACTED]

Trafficking Organizations

Trafficking organizations are well entrenched. Most traffickers probably began as smugglers who saw the lucrative narcotics trade as a natural extension of

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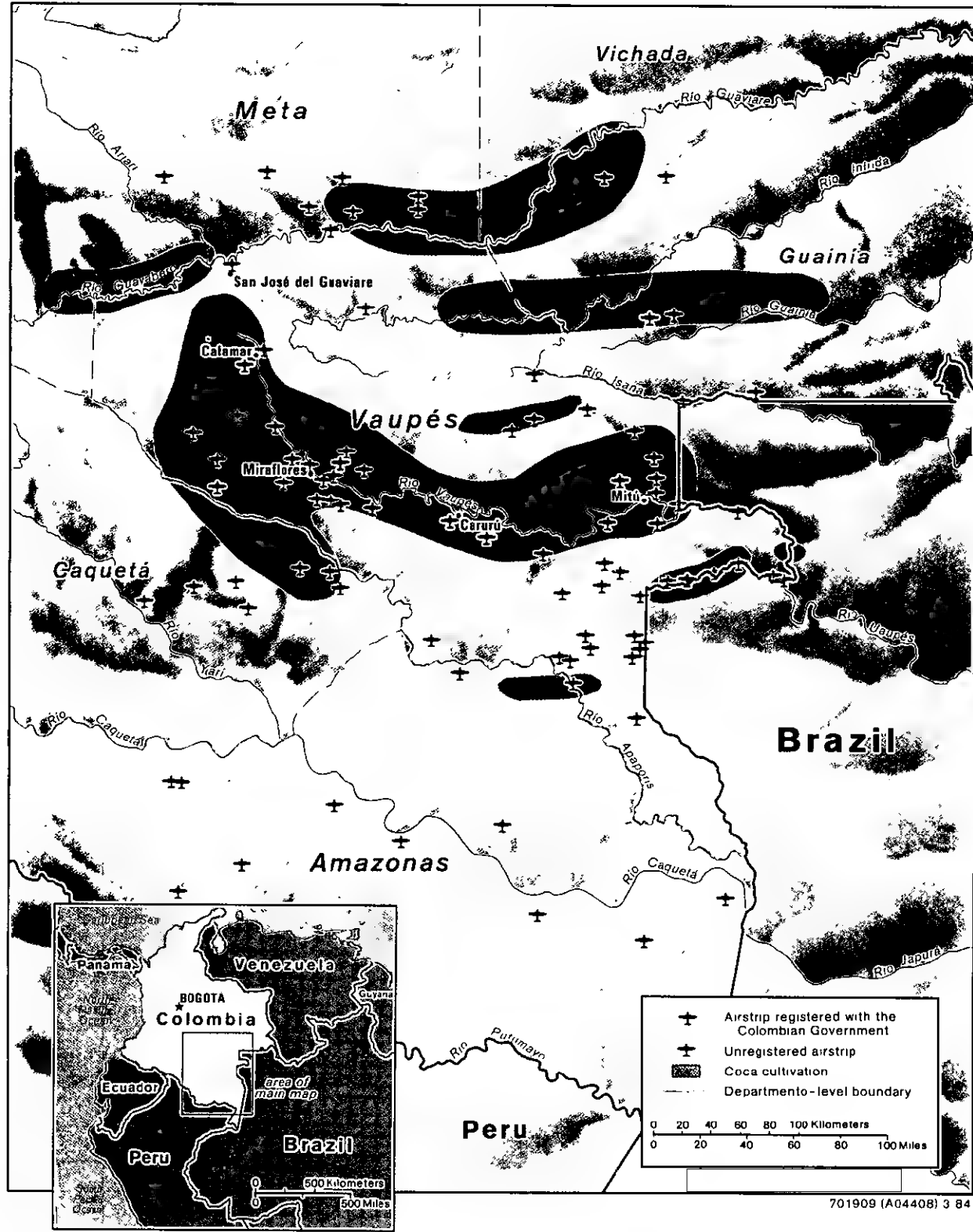
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Figure 5
Airstrips and Coca Cultivation



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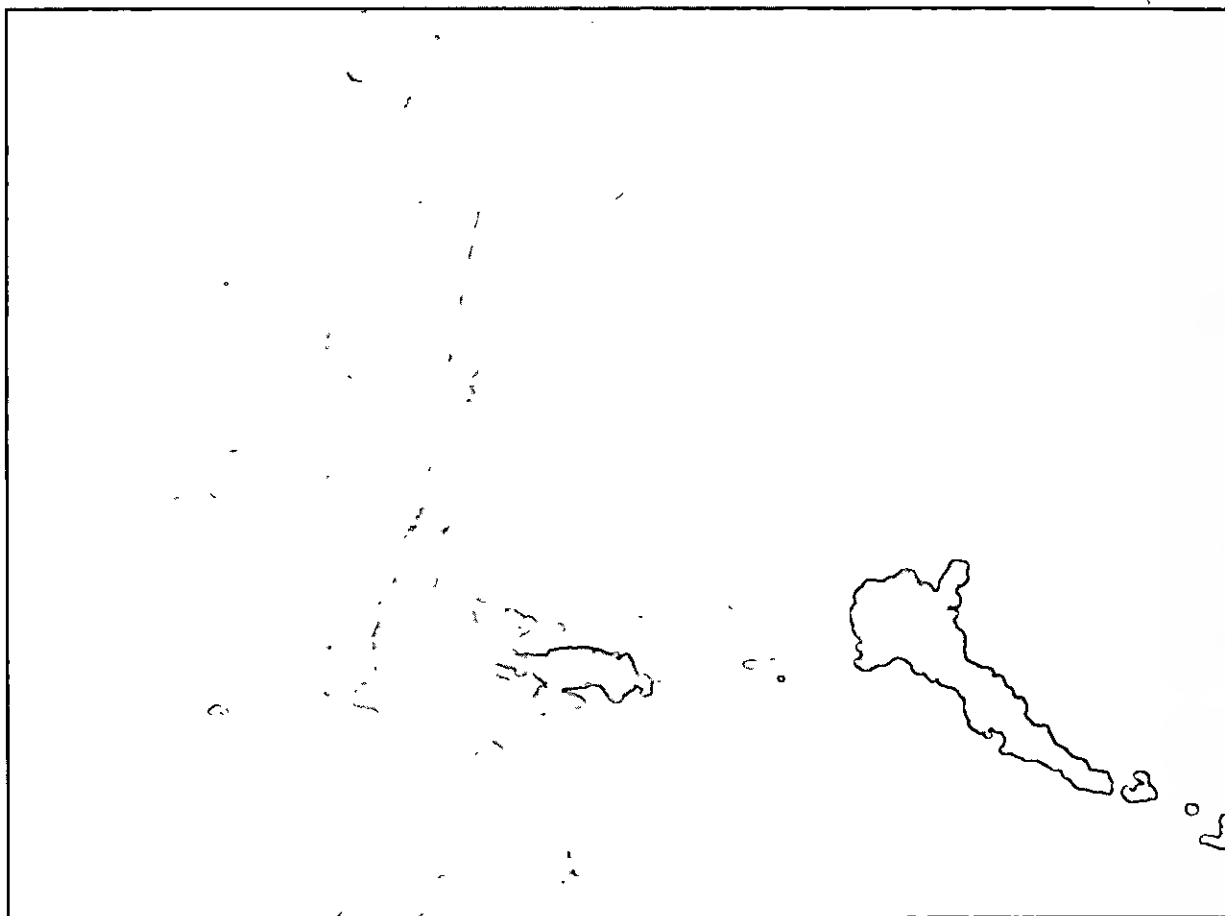


Figure 6. Cocaine base laboratory and airstrip in southeastern Colombia, August 1983. [redacted]

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their already profitable illegal activities. Moreover, several Colombian insurgent/terrorist groups apparently have entered the drug business at least to a limited degree—further complicating any government drug control effort. [redacted]

Traditional Colombian Traffickers

Colombian traffickers recently have sought to expand their illicit activity and consolidate their position and increase their influence in Colombia. According to US Embassy reports, some traffickers have been openly using the large sums of money available to them to attempt to infiltrate established political parties, secure public office, block drug control legislation and programs, and in general create a favorable climate for their activities. The traffickers' astute and

aggressive use of the Colombian media—to portray themselves as heroes taking on the giant from the north—not only has won them some popular support but at times has put the government on the defensive. During the past year, for example, traffickers mounted a well-orchestrated propaganda campaign that helped scuttle the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty and block the extradition of two Colombian drug traffickers to the United States. [redacted]

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According to DEA, many of the Colombian drug-trafficking organizations are secretive, closed, self-perpetuating criminal enterprises with vast financial

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resources at their disposal. Motivated by power and profit, the more sophisticated and professional syndicates operate in much the same way as large multinational corporations—with compartmentalized functions such as finance, banking, legal defense, transportation, and logistics, as well as import-export and retail departments. Some organizations are drug specific, others handle a variety of drugs, and still others smuggle all types of contraband such as electrical appliances, weapons, and jewelry. []

Many organizations rely on trusted family members to carry out operations, a major obstacle to any effort by drug enforcement authorities to penetrate these illicit trafficking operations. A typical example of a traditional Colombian trafficking organization is the Manuel Garces Gonzalez family, identified by Colombian police in February 1982 as one of the most active narcotics-trafficking networks in Colombia. The Gonzalez group operates out of Medellin. Family members act as foreign representatives to oversee the export of at least 200 kilograms of cocaine a month to the United States and Europe. Other drug-trafficking families identified by the Colombian Police and DEA include those headed by Bernardo Londono Quintero, Fabio Ochoa Restrepo, Joaquin and Jaime Builes, Carlos Lehder Rivas, Gomez Van Grieken, and Fernando Correa. []

Nontraditional Traffickers

Several Colombian insurgent/terrorist groups apparently are also involved in the illicit drug trade. Although the activities of such groups do not rival those of the traditional trafficking families, their involvement in drug trafficking is a matter of some concern to military and police officials, who fear that the insurgents are using drug traffickers and their smuggling networks to obtain arms and money. []

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The largest and most formidable Marxist-Leninist insurgent group in Colombia, the FARC entered the drug business about 1977, at first exacting fees from traffickers for use of FARC-controlled territory. It soon began to tax coca production in its strongholds and, according to US Embassy reports, has even established production quotas for growers and wage guidelines for workers. Embassy reports

also indicate that one of the FARC's fronts in south-east Colombia was organized expressly for the control of coca production, with the aim of using the profits from the trade to support other FARC units. Embassy officers also suspect the FARC is responsible for two attacks in 1983 on National Police antinarcotics patrols, one in the San Jose del Guaviare region and the other in an area of heavy coca cultivation along the Rio Vaupes between Calamar and Caruru. []

The National Liberation Army (ELN). The ELN is a small Castroite Marxist-Leninist organization established in 1963 that operates throughout Colombia. According to unconfirmed Embassy reports, ELN members have been involved in extorting money from coca growers and in cultivating marijuana. []

The Popular Liberation Army (EPL). Founded in 1967, the group was originally associated with the now defunct pro-Beijing Colombian Communist Party/Marxist-Leninist (PCC/ML). The EPL is active in Colombia's Cordoba Department and in the Golfo de Uraba region. Colombian authorities have told US officials that they suspect that the EPL gets some of its weapons from drug traffickers operating in the Gulf of Uraba region and that some EPL members may be engaged in marijuana cultivation and trafficking. []

The Colombian 19th of April Movement (M-19). The M-19, a leftist terrorist group that rose to prominence in 1974, successfully used the drug-smuggling apparatus of Jaime Guillot Lara to bring a large shipment of weapons into Colombia in October 1981. According to US Embassy reporting, it has extorted money from traffickers and members of their families. []

Government Reaction

Government reaction to the narcotics situation suggests an increasing recognition of the problem, but prospects for a comprehensive antinarcotics program remain remote. Since August 1983, several Colombian officials have initiated and supported a number of

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drug-related measures, prompted—we believe—by an increased awareness of the growing domestic drug abuse problem, reaction to the public flaunting by some drug traffickers of their illicitly acquired wealth, and increasing concern over the blatant efforts of some traffickers to participate actively in the Colombian political process. The actions taken include:

- Congressional hearings last August on the influence of drug money in Colombian politics, which brought unexpected national attention to the growing infiltration of drug traffickers into the Colombian political system.
- Participation of several government ministers in a Bogota drug abuse awareness conference sponsored by the United States last September. Breaking with tradition, these ministers acknowledged publicly that Colombia has a drug abuse problem. At the time, the US Embassy in Bogota believed the conference contributed materially to a more favorable climate for US drug control initiatives.
- An announcement at the conference by the Minister of Health of plans for a national drug abuse awareness and prevention campaign to be headed by the wife of Colombian President Betancur.
- A speech in September by the mayor of Bogota outlining a proposed antidrug campaign that would feature a crackdown on street sales of cocaine-laced marijuana cigarettes, called bazucas, to juveniles.
- Bogota's decision to send an eight-man technical team to Mexico and the United States in late September to study the use of herbicides in controlling marijuana and coca cultivation and the subsequent decision to implement a test spray program.
- The destruction of a large-scale cocaine- hydrochloride-processing facility along the Rio Taurare in Caqueta Department by Colombian National Police. The operation, which resulted in the seizure of an estimated 8,500 kilograms of cocaine hydrochloride, also included the arrest of more than 40 persons, the seizure of seven aircraft, and the destruction of 10 laboratories.

- Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla's plans, according to the US Embassy, to publicly identify trafficking organizations, discredit drug traffickers through media campaigns, cancel the pilot licenses of traffickers, disable unauthorized landing strips, issue arrest warrants for major drug traffickers, and investigate drug-related corruption of the judiciary.

- The creation of a bilateral enforcement working group with Venezuela that in February culminated in an agreement reaffirming the two countries' commitment to joint cooperation in controlling drug trafficking, guerrilla operations, and kidnapping along their common border.

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Despite these statements and plans, both existing and proposed drug control programs in Colombia face constraints—recently enumerated by the US Embassy in Bogota—that will allow drug traffickers to continue to operate with relative impunity:

- **Social.** A longstanding public attitude of ambivalence toward drug issues makes it difficult for the Colombian Government to obtain cooperation or stir up enthusiasm for drug control programs. Many Colombians simply do not view marijuana or coca cultivation as a criminal activity, and some continue to believe that drug trafficking actually generates significant employment and wealth for the country.
- **Economic.** High unemployment in both rural and urban areas assures traffickers—who pay higher wages (US \$7.50 per day) than can be earned in legitimate agriculture (\$3.00 per day) or in menial city jobs—an abundant and cheap supply of labor. Moreover, complicated and increasingly restrictive government import controls have contributed to the continued traffic in contraband of all kinds.
- **Political.** Government decisions on drug control will continue to be influenced in the coming months by competition among government agencies for scarce resources; political expediency; intimidation by traffickers; widespread corruption; inadequate drug laws; ineffective legal, penal, and judicial systems; and a lack of effective political and military control over some drug cultivation zones.

- **Geographic.** Colombia's proximity to the United States and its long unpatrolled coastlines bordering two oceans ideally suit it for illegal drug-trafficking operations. Moreover, Colombia's mountainous northern departments and the vast tropical rain forest of the southeastern departments are physically and climatically well suited to marijuana and coca cultivation, but not conducive to enforcement activities. [redacted]

We believe the development of an effective Colombian antinarcotics program also has been constrained by a lack of strong presidential support and leadership. Betancur has given the narcotics problem little attention. He avoided drug issues during his campaign and has since shown little interest in formulating a coordinated drug policy, being preoccupied instead with Third World politics, Colombia's troubled economy, and the persistent indigenous terrorist and insurgent threat. [redacted]

In addition, Betancur's Hispanic nationalism has resulted in the implementation of a new foreign policy that constrains development of a Colombian antinarcotics policy.³ More oriented toward the Third World and designed both to demonstrate Colombia's independence from the United States and to propel the country to the forefront of Latin America's diplomatic ranks, this policy has already contributed to two setbacks for US drug control efforts in Colombia:

- The Foreign Relations Committee of the Colombian House of Representatives—echoing and probably influenced by Betancur's views—voted to postpone indefinitely debate on the US-Colombian Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty, according to foreign press reports, on the grounds that certain articles are unconstitutional and should be renegotiated.
- President Betancur decided not to sign the final papers for the extradition of any Colombians to the United States. Betancur apparently shares the views of some of his closest advisers that the Extradition Treaty is an attack on Colombian sovereignty. [redacted]

Indicators of Possible Change

The lack of a strong government program to counter the activities of well-organized trafficking groups—already a problem—may reach crisis proportions if drug production increases according to our expectations. We will continue to monitor crop production prospects, and there are a number of indicators that bear watching to detect further changes in Colombian attitudes toward drug control. The clearest of these involve decisions that will be made at the highest level of government:

- The decision by President Betancur on the extradition to the United States of major Colombian narcotics trafficker Carlos Lehder Rivas. Betancur's refusal to approve the extradition of two other Colombian traffickers to the United States on nationalistic grounds and his recent talks with US officials on the status and implementation of the Extradition Treaty, however, do not augur well for Lehder's extradition to the United States.

- Decisions by the Colombian Government on whether or not to resurrect the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty that is designed to facilitate US investigation of illegal drug-related financial transactions and seizures of drug traffickers' financial assets. [redacted]

A second set of indicators that reflect further changes in attitudes at the ministerial level include both domestic and foreign policy actions. On the domestic scene:

- The extent of the Government of Colombia's multimedia campaigns and sponsorship of city and departmental drug abuse conferences.
- The probable resignation—partly out of frustration—of Minister of Justice Rodrigo Bonilla Lara, who is the principal advocate in the Colombian Government for drug control and who supports US policies in this area.

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- Completion of a herbicidal spray testing program begun in February 1984 and the implementation of a herbicidal spray campaign against marijuana and coca plants by June 1984.
- A high-level executive decision to commit the Colombian military to any antinarcotics efforts.
- The extent of Colombian Government enforcement of drug laws, as measured by National Police eradication and interdiction statistics.

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On the foreign policy side:

- Extent and status of Colombian efforts to implement regional initiatives in drug control, such as the resolutions adopted at the South American Narcotics Accord Conference in November 1983 and, more specifically, the ongoing dialogue between Colombian and Venezuelan officials over increased cooperation in border control matters.
- Colombian Government reactions to US legislation curtailing US foreign aid to drug source countries that do not demonstrate verifiable progress in crop reduction.
- The level of cooperation between Colombian Government personnel and Drug Enforcement Administration and State Department narcotics officers especially in the wake of US seizures of a Colombian ship (Ciudad de Popayan) and aircraft (Avianca) for involvement in drug trafficking.

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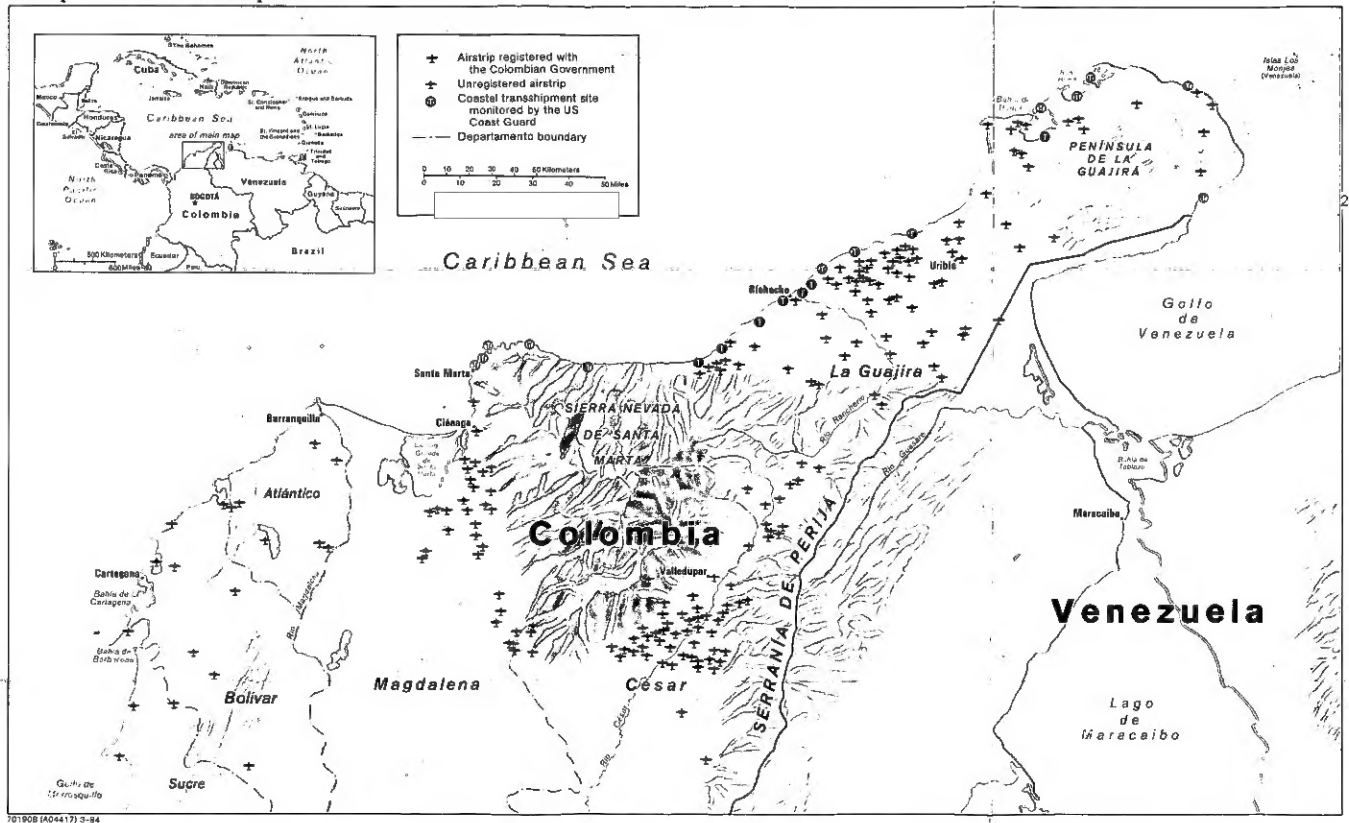
This second set of domestic and foreign policy indicators is not as likely as the first to provide an unambiguous signal of the direction of change in Colombian narcotics policy but may help predict additional decisions at the highest level.

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Figure 7
Airstrips and Coastal Transshipment Sites



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